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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Bureau of Agricultural EconomicsUNDERSTANDING HOW THE WHEELS GO AROUND IN NEW ENGLAND^A
RURAL COMMUNITIES 1/

A great many people today engage in careers which involve working directly with rural people. And we all live in some sort of societal relationships with other people, whether or not we work directly with them.

One foundation stone for effectively living and working with people is UNDERSTANDING. We are discussing here a few general principles for helping one to understand rural society, with factual information and illustrations drawn largely from our study of five hill-towns in the western part of Hampshire County, Massachusetts.

In the first place, every person has certain individual and social tendencies and requirements which he strives to satisfy in making living worth while, and communities are simply nothing more than a composite of interacting people who are trying to live according to their individual and social makeup. Therefore, in our living and working with people it must be recognized that the nature and conditions of communities, are what they are, because of the people who live in them.

Communities are rich or poor because the people in them are; communities are divided into conflicting classes and groups or are united and actively loyal, because the people in them are; communities have active, high-quality schools, churches, and other organizations or they have poor ones, because the people in the community want or consent to having them that way; communities have delinquency and other social problems or they do not, depending on what the people for various reasons give their consent to by action or inaction at any given time; some things are done in communities because the majority of people in them are growing old, in other communities things are or are not done because the predominate attitudes are those of youth.

All this means that any work with people and communities must be fundamentally an educational process, beginning with what and where the people are at that given time.

Communities do truly exist, but not as entities separate from the people who live in them. The characteristics of any given community are pretty much influenced or determined by what the people living in it really want or are willing to have. And finally, what people are like is pretty much determined by those standards, attitudes, and ways of doing which have come into their cultural heritage up through the years.

1/ Condensation of statements made in an address at the Hampshire Regional Conference of Social Agencies, Northampton, Mass., June 1944, and in other Extension meetings by E. J. Niederfrank, Social Science Analyst, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U. S. Dept. of Agr., Upper Darby, Pa.

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In the second place, as a result of the way people are, all rural communities have a rather definite social structure, but they are not all alike in "appearance." Just as the human body is constructed around a framework of bones, muscles, and joints; or a building around a framework of corner stones, sills, and joists; so rural communities are also composed of rather definite structural elements. But even so, communities differ from place to place just as human beings or buildings do. Some of the structural elements that go to make up communities are:

(1) The family, which is the basic structural element of societita all over the world, and probably is the group which has the greatest influence upon the personality of individuals.

(2) Locality groupings such as "the hill" neighborhood in Cummington or Lithia neighborhood in Goshen, or the hamlets of South Worthington and West Chesterfield, or Cummington Village, or Plainfield community. These are what may be called locality groupings.

(3) Formally-organized groups and associations, such as the Grange, the churches, the 4-H Clubs, the Women's Benevolent societies, the American Legion, or the various farmers' organizations.

(4) Informal groupings such as card and social clubs, family supper or visiting groups, Red Cross sewing groups, and the like.

(5) The local governmental set-up, embracing a definitely-established township area, with its string of officers, its traditions, its patterns or ways of doing.

(6) Another structural element in rural society consists of the status groups and economic classes found in it, such as racial groups, religious groups and denominations, country folks and villagers, local people and summer people, natives and newcomers, common folks and the long-established families or "bluebloods", or the Yankees and other nationality groups, and so on.

It must not be overlooked that all these structural elements or groupings are more or less cemented together by attitudes, loyalties, desires, habits, and traditions, and these also influence how communities function up through the years.

Now let us mention a high spot or two about some of these structural elements of rural society. Take locality groupings in the Northeast: (a) The township or "town" is pretty much the "community", because several important features or activities like local government, churches, school, Grange, and library have become highly institutionalized around town boundary lines, and people have a strong sense of "belonging" to a town. Thus, when one speaks of a community in New England his thinking must begin with the town, which is different from the generalized, indefinite community of the Midwest or South. (b) The old rural neighborhood no longer exists as a closely-knit social group, although in many cases the names still linger to describe conveniently or to identify certain geographic sections of a town. Sometimes these localities merely follow names of roads, often

called streets in rural Massachusetts. However, the fact is that the neighborhood never was a strong social group in New England, for the simple reason that at the start the New England town quickly became institutionalized as the real center of local attachment, since original settlement of the land was by small groups of families who had acquired title to a given area called a township by purchase either as a group or by a leading individual from the early land colonization companies of mother countries.

Some social scientists and educators have been wondering whether or not wartime travel restrictions have perhaps brought back the old neighborhood again. In my opinion they have not done so in New England, in general. It is true that families are not visiting out of town as they did in pre-war days, but I have found that, so far, people are only staying at home more, and have not yet developed any patterns of neighborliness sufficiently significant generally to reconstitute the neighborhood as a true social grouping. However, there is somewhat more activity on a town or community basis in most towns.

One significant observation about formally-organized groups and institutions in rural communities is that they vary widely in activity, effectiveness, and loyalty as between towns. One town may have a thriving church or Grange, let us say, while in the town next to it these may be nearly dead. Why is this? A variety of reasons might be cited, but the most important probably are: (a) Differences in leadership and people as said before; (b) family feuds and feeling; (c) often failure to recognize that the group was to serve the people and their needs and that the power to adjust or remedy situations was really in their own hands. Also, if one looks back into the life history of a dying organization or church he often finds that 1, 5, or maybe 20 years ago some incident occurred that alienated the people or divided them into conflicting groups; and when a family once gets out of the habit of taking part it is difficult to restore its interest and activity.

One generalization about status groups and classes that can clearly be made from study of the hill-towns, is that the lines are not sharp between various status groups and that the extremes of income are not wide apart. Towns vary in this regard. Nevertheless, various combinations and cleavages develop momentarily as local issues or other matters of interest come to the fore. And even though status lines and income differences may be small in some places, they do have meaning in leadership, group activity, and community spirit and unity; therefore, they must be recognized by those who are working with rural communities.

In some towns the line between native "bluebloods" and newcomers still reappears quite clearly at times in local government, social organizations, and other ways, but intermarriage and intermigration have resulted in considerable mixture and tends to make it difficult for any one particular element to control local government and other goings-on. It might be added that probably none of the hill-towns would have been what they are today were it not for the influx of new people, particularly school teachers, who have trickled into these communities up through the years and stayed. They have added much in the way of leadership and

services. In most towns the line between country and village folks also appears distinctly at times, but, thanks to the strong township form of government, this line is not nearly so significant in New England as it is in some other sections of the country. There is, or would be, a distinct line between nationality or cultural backgrounds, but so far this line is not important in the hill-towns because they are still predominately Yankee. But in case of all these status lines, whether between localities, cultural backgrounds, or what have you, there is no sharp struggle or conflict; only competition in most cases. And communities would die without wholesome competition.

Finally, these paragraphs emphasize what was mentioned before---that although communities are developed out of all these groupings or structural elements, they differ considerably from place to place. For example, the neighborhoods and town-like communities of New England are not like those of the Midwest; the status groupings in the hill-towns of Hampshire County are not like those of the valley towns in the county, etc.

Thirdly, it is important to remember that all the constituents elements of rural society, and the factors playing upon it, are always in some sort of a working or causal relationship. For example, the state of a run-down church or an inactive PTA may be due to conflict between certain groups in the community, or to selection of a leader from a certain element in the town, or to the failure of an organization to meet certain needs of the majority of its members. Again, the disinterest in certain extension work may be rooted in a feeling among the so-called strong or active people in the community that they have outgrown that particular program. Again, the especially strong support of Red Cross in a certain town was due largely to the united effort of all major organizations, and this united effort was in turn due to an alert and well-accepted leadership, to the humble and self-sacrificing devotion of key families, and to the absence of any particular conflicts and jealousies in the community. In another town the ladies' society of the church may be found to be nearly dead because its control and support have remained in the hands of a few women who have grown old and now find they forgot to enlist younger women and to broaden the society's activities. Again, some of the farming practices of many farmers, or the way the people of a given locality may operate their church, may be related to certain fundamental attitudes and traditions of long standing, like an attitude of conservatism, a feeling of individual pride, or to a certain historic person or occurrence in the community that now commands a kind of symbolic loyalty.

One must appreciate the fact that rural society has a definite structure, that many interrelated elements and factors come to play in the functioning of any ordinary rural community, and that it takes some careful analysis of these if one is to effectively understand and work with rural people and rural communities.

In the fourth place, some elements of rural community life tend to become institutionalized or fixed in character and to strongly resist change, whereas others change more readily and keep up with our fast-moving technological advances of the last half century. For instance, in some hill-towns the business of the Congregational Church is still on the basis

of the old parish established when the church was part of the function of the town and was operated by the parish members regardless of whether they were members of the church, whereas the operation of its religious functions was in the hands of the church members. In one of the five towns studied, the old parish organization was dissolved just last year and the church organization was incorporated. Others had done so earlier, but some towns still cling to the old parish idea. Regardless of which may be best the significant point is that here is an institutionalized feature of rural society which must be reckoned with by those who are trying to understand the community and plan their work in it.

Again some attachments that grow up about a place or thing are sometimes nearly permanent or are very difficult to change. For example, attachments to a local one-room school or to a small struggling church. It is difficult to consolidate churches when people are reared to be devoted to or have become accustomed to certain things. They do not give them up easily. Certainly they don't easily change places of going to church, even if they have changed places of trading during the years of the automobile.

(I might add that I personally am not an "efficiency crank" who believes in wholesale consolidation of churches for the sake of "better" churches, whatever they are. I can understand some of the values that people have in mind when they object to consolidation, and I can appreciate the fact that some values accrue from a denominational connection or from a localism in school or church.)

The most strongly institutionalized element of New England rural society, however, is that which is the very basis of rural social structure here; that is, the township. Every township has had its hamlet or village center from the beginning, where usually were located the town hall, town public church, school, general store, and later the library and the Grange hall. These places and activities became institutionalized in each town as the people identified themselves with them and the township they served. From the beginning the town built roads, assessed property, collected taxes, policed the people, provided for the poor. Thus the township became institutionalized as the community.

But automobile, and other modern developments came along, and people found the town too small in some ways to serve adequately in modern times, so adjustments were made through the years although often only after bitter struggle and resistance to change. Under modern conditions rural people in the hill-towns trade everywhere, visit friends and relatives in all directions, go to high school in various surrounding towns and cities, go in all directions and distances to movies and dances. War may have changed these adjustments temporarily, of course. Also, towns today cooperate in school unions for employing a school superintendent, the State has taken over the main roads, subsidizes the educational system, assists in public welfare, and the like. But other activities all remain on a strictly town basis--the churches, the elementary school--the local government with its traditional town meeting, own property assessment and tax collection, and string of local officers--the library, the Grange, and various other local organizations.

From the standpoint of efficiency and higher standards it may be advisable for towns to make certain additional adjustments and changes; from the standpoint of certain deeper values and purposes held by rural people, these may not be advisable. Probably in the future some towns may have to consolidate or work together still more on certain matters, or else lose more local governmental functions to the county, State, and federal Governments. Our towns constitute some of the last remaining vestiges of local government and processes which many rural people want to preserve. If they want these they should be alert to those adjustments that will help them do so.

Our whole point here has been that some things in rural life become institutionalized and change very slowly. Sometimes this is advantageous for the community and sometimes not. Other things change more quickly. One of the major problems of any particular community, or indeed of the whole world, is how to adjust the old so that it will fit conditions of the new, and still preserve desired cultural values.

A fifth general fact to keep in mind is that the interests and activities of various community organizations and groups often tend to become self-centered and channelized in line with their own county, State, and national federated units, while the larger problems and activities of community-wide interest get little or no attention from local groups. The local Grange gears its program to State Grange policies and requirements, a certain church tries to meet denominational suggestions in its program, Extension and the 4-H Clubs have certain things they want to accomplish and certain times and ways of doing it according to certain county or State policies and requirements.

But the community is larger than any one group or element in it. Therefore, any problems and activities which are of community-wide nature require some kind of organization and unified action on the part of all groups and interests in the community.

Some sort of a community council or similar body perhaps would be the best solution in some towns, such a council to be made up of one or two representatives from each major organization and club in the community. This committee or council would be in a position to look at the whole community, and any community project which was felt desirable by the community itself or which was brought in by an outside agency, could be spearheaded by the council and carried forward for the community as a whole. In this way each organization would be doing something of community-wide nature. This committee would be likely to handle larger community matters such as home extension, Red Cross, public health and welfare, recreation program, school or church matters, and other problems of community-wide nature which any single organization was unable or unwilling to do by itself. In other communities some other form of unified action might be even more desirable than the community council. At any rate, the development of greater or more sound community organization must grow out of self-education and self-analysis of the community.

All this emphasizes that one should first find out how people are already organized, then begin with them as they are found and build a sound and more permanent community organization on this, rather than

immediately setting up a new local organization of some kind for every new job to be done in the community. One will recognize the plausibility of this, if he will but reflect on how the work of Civilian Defense was brought down from the top to rural communities, then through them to local families and individuals. The school principal or minister who is trying to tackle a youth-recreation problem will agree to the wisdom of community-wide organization; so also will the social worker, the Extension agent, the Red Cross nurse, and the town selectman.

To sum up: We have pointed out (1) that society is made up of interacting individuals and that the nature of communities are dependent upon what the people are like who live in them; (2) that rural society is more or less constituted of certain structural elements; (3) that many of these structural elements and processes often exist in some working or causal interrelationship, and thus influence one another; (4) that some elements and conditions of rural community life tend to become institutionalized and change slowly, whereas others change rapidly, with resulting problems of maladjustment, and (5) that community organizations and groups tend to busy themselves with their own specialized activities in the town, while problems or needs of the community as a whole are sometimes overlooked.

These are some of the principles or tendencies I have observed time and time again in connection with our researches in the hill-towns and other sections of rural New England. Doubtless you have observed these and others in your own experiences. They all have to be considered both by local people and outside agencies, when dealing with such things as appointing local leaders, selecting places to hold meetings, yoking churches under one ministry, combining towns into a school union, deciding on policies and program-building, planning methods of approach, organization for post-war aid and planning, and like activities. But these principles are often neglected. As a physician needs to be familiar with the structure of the human body, or a mechanic with the principle of the gas engine, so also educators and administrators of all levels need to appreciate the fundamental structure and processes of rural society, if they are to serve and work with rural people most effectively.

